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# A Rancid Rerun of the Contra Debate?

Predictably, the cause of the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries (contras) was front and center among President Reagan's concerns in his State of the Union address on Tuesday. For the president, dismantling the Nicaraguan "second Cuba" in Central America is more than a goal; according to close associates, it's a personal obsession.

Very well, if that's what the president wants—a crunching collision and a rancid rerun of last year's debate. Before Congress got around last June to restoring military aid (\$70 million) after a one-year lapse in a \$100 million package (the balance in "humanitarian" aid), the White House had branded Democratic opponents as no better than the Ortega brothers, and the Democrats were darkly doubting the president's intentions, integrity and good faith.

With little new evidence to show that the contras can accomplish their fuzzy mission of pressuring the Sandinista government to "negotiate" democracy for Nicaragua, chances of the administration's repeating last year's success were iffy even before the Republicans lost control of the Senate. Shortly thereafter, Attorney General Edwin Meese announced that the White House had lost control of Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Now the chances look next to nil. The Senate margin for the contras last year was close (53 to 47), and the Democrats now have a 10-vote majority. The new speaker of the House, Jim Wright, thinks Meese's disclosure that up to \$30 million of profits from arms sales to Iran were skimmed off for the contras "makes it much more unlikely" that the House will sustain last year's narrow 221-to-209 vote.

Conceivably, an accommodating administration could salvage some sustenance for the contras if it was tied to a diplomatic process and to economic aid to shore up Nicaragua's neighboring democracies. But obsessions do not lend themselves to accommodations.

No sooner had the profit-skimming story broken than contra-aid supporters rushed to break any connection between what looked like a spreading scandal (of which the president was allegedly unaware) and the U.S. security issue at stake in Nicaragua. That U.S. operatives under—or out of—administration control not only diverted Iranian arms profits to the contras, but secretly promoted under-the-table support for the

contras from the Sultan of Brunei and other American clients around the world at a time when Congress had pointedly shut down U.S. military aid, is dismissed as irrelevant. "That period is over," says the administration point man for contra aid, Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs. "Now the U.S. government is funding the contras."

That's what Abrams thinks. Some of his congressional adversaries think otherwise. They argue that the contra aid scandals are entirely relevant and no accident; that they are, in fact, the inevitable consequence of a deliberate, covert administration effort to make war without congressional consent. "The administration has been playing with the constitutional war-making process," says one.

So the opposition in the House is already mobilizing for a frontal assault. The counter-strategy is still up in the air. But last week, leaders of the opposition were already testing options, counting noses and finding growing support for forging an explicit connection between the contra-aid scandals and continuation of U.S. aid.

They would do this by imposing a "moratorium" until congressional investigators explain assorted mysteries about what actually happened. They want to know how much money ever reached Ronald Reagan's "freedom fighters" before they even consider the administration's budget request for \$105 million more.

A first test of the strength of the opposition will come early next month when the president must submit a "progress report" before releasing the remaining balance (\$40 million) from last year's \$100 million. Congress, after studying the report, will have until Feb. 15 to vote to block further disbursements. The president, in turn, can veto the blocking resolution and almost certainly has the votes to prevent an override.

But the "moratorium" approach could still delay any action on next year's budget request until October, when the investigating committees are due to submit their findings. And the findings, in turn, could be sufficiently scandalous to make a shambles of any coherent approach to dealing with the menace the administration sees in Managua.

It's a troublesome way to deal with an important matter of national security. But an administration insensitive enough to act as if nothing out of the way has happened to its Nicaraguan policy is asking for trouble.